

Changes in the Atlantic Flyway Sea Duck Season



Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Image



BACKGROUND

Prior to 2016, sea duck hunting season frameworks allowed for 107 hunting days, the maximum under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and a bag limit of seven sea ducks per day. These liberal hunting season frameworks for sea ducks stemmed from decades ago, when sea ducks were pursued infrequently and were considered an underutilized species. Since that time sea duck hunting has become more popular, and waterfowl biologists are concerned about the impacts of this harvest on sea duck populations as surveys and assessments show declines in many sea duck populations. In 2016, the Atlantic Flyway Council and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) approved reducing the number of sea duck hunting days from 107 to 60 days, and the bag limit from 7 sea ducks to 5 sea ducks per day, with no more than 4 of any one sea duck species.

The goal of this sea duck hunting season change, starting in 2016, was a 25% reduction in sea duck harvest over the next five years. Since then, harvest has increased for long-tailed ducks (73%), common eider (14%), black scoter (40%) and surf scoter (18%). These harvest increases prompted Atlantic Flyway waterfowl biologists to reconsider the sea duck season and develop a new framework starting in 2022 to achieve the desired sea duck harvest reduction.

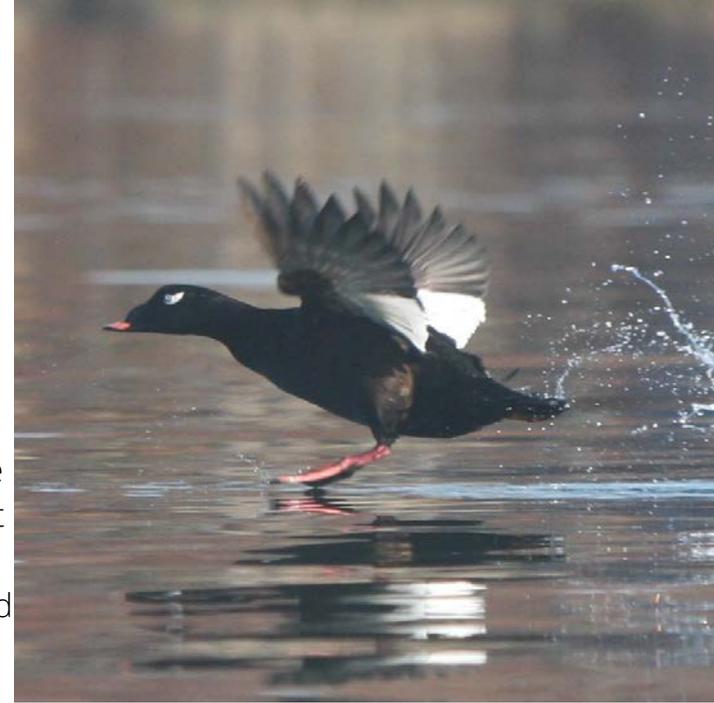


Photo: Kelsey Sullivan



MOVING FORWARD WITH CHANGES

Atlantic Flyway and USFWS biologists evaluated the expected level of sea duck harvest reduction under several scenarios that included combinations of the number of sea duck hunting days allowed, timing of when those hunting days occurred, species-specific bag limits, and total sea duck daily bag limits.

The scenario that was agreeable and best fit the goal of reducing sea duck harvest was the elimination of the Special Sea Duck Season in the Atlantic Flyway beginning with the 2022-2023 waterfowl hunting season. Under this new framework, sea duck season dates and bag limits will be included within the regular duck season frameworks. For example, a state with a coastal duck zone will include sea duck hunting during that coastal duck zone season and any sea ducks taken will count towards the general duck daily bag limit. In addition, no more than 4 sea ducks can be taken per day with species daily bag limits reduced to 3 scoters, 3 long-tailed ducks or 3 eiders, to include no more than 1 hen eider.

FUTURE MONITORING AND RESEARCH

Monitoring sea duck populations is logistically challenging and expensive, specifically harvest and survival rates. Sea ducks are found in remote locations throughout their life cycle making it difficult to implement operational banding or other monitoring programs that are commonly used for many other waterfowl species. While managers must make decisions about duck harvest regulations based on the best available data, it is understood that the level of precision and confidence in making harvest management decisions is directly correlated to the quality of the data.

As a result, the USFWS and Atlantic Flyway are working to improve our ability to monitor annual sea duck harvest and population trends. Improvements to harvest reporting are being developed and will soon be operational. Also underway is a survey to measure scoter and long-tailed duck reproductive potential as well as a large-scale effort to mark common eiders with tracking devices to quantify their annual breeding potential, which will help in understanding the declines in common eiders that are occurring in portions of their eastern range.

As a waterfowl hunter, you can assist in monitoring sea duck harvest each year when you buy your State hunting license and accurately register for the Harvest Information Program (HIP) by answering a series of questions on the number and type of waterfowl you hunted in the previous year. Then, if notified that you are one of the hunters selected to participate in additional surveys, take the time to respond to surveys about your hunting activity and harvest, and to provide wings from harvested birds if requested. This information is used by the Atlantic Flyway to inform future harvest decisions. The more information we have, the more confident we can be that our sea duck hunting seasons are allowing for harvest at levels that will provide recreational opportunities while also sustaining sea duck populations into the future.